

VZCZCXRO0473  
RR RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHDIR  
DE RUEHRH #1532/01 3211435  
ZNY SSSSS ZZH  
R 171435Z NOV 09  
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1939  
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 001532

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/18/2019

TAGS: [SCUL](#) [KPAO](#) [KWMN](#) [OEXC](#) [SA](#) [XF](#) [ZP](#) [ZR](#)

SUBJECT: KAUST--A STANDARD IN THE BATTLE OVER SAUDI VALUES?

REF: A) RIYADH 1278, B) JEDDAH 0342

Classified By: DCM Susan Ziadeh for reasons 1.4b, d

#### Summary

11. (C) In conversations with post contacts in media and cultural circles, PAS officers and LES staff are hearing anecdotes of increased public dissatisfaction with the reform efforts of King Abdullah as exemplified in the international and mixed gender King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST), which opened in September to great fanfare. At the same time, the head of the Riyadh Literary Club told us that he was able to program an Embassy-sponsored rhythm and oratory duo before a mixed audience in Riyadh recently "because after KAUST, all things are possible." (Ironically, PAS Jeddah attempted to program the same duo at KAUST, but the request was flatly rejected.) While it is impossible to tell at this point whether these contradictory impressions of KAUST represent anything beyond the continuing and often fractious internal debate on the cultural and social direction of Saudi Arabia, the persistence and provenance of rumors that ordinary Saudis are rejecting the progressive reforms of the King in favor of more traditional and religious perspectives is worth tracking. End Summary.

12. (U) Embassy Riyadh and ConGens Dhahran and Jeddah brought the US rhythm duo "Teasley and Williams" to Saudi Arabia October 23-29 for highly-acclaimed performances in Riyadh, Jeddah and Dhahran. In Riyadh, the duo's performance at the Riyadh Literary Club played to an unprecedented mixed-gender audience (mixed by Saudi standards--the handful of women who attended sat in a screened-off block of seats across the aisle from the men.) Nonetheless, the fact that women were even invited to a musical performance with men in Riyadh is remarkable. In the recent past, the Saudi religious police (or their conservative fellow travelers) have regularly disrupted children's plays, poetry readings and other artistic and literary events in Saudi Arabia even when the organizers had official approval from the Ministry of Culture and Information.

13. (C) When asked by emboffs during an equipment check for the duo at Riyadh Literary Club why he had decided to risk conservative ire by inviting women to the first public performance by a US-Embassy sponsored musical duo in Riyadh in over twenty years, club president and Shura Council member Dr. Saad al-Bazei told us, "After KAUST, everything is possible." The clear implication of Dr. al-Bazei's statement was that the liberalizing message sent by King Abdullah in opening a mixed-gender, international university as part of a broader effort to counter the influence of religious conservatives was now policy, and was being heard loud and clear by all segments of Saudi society.

14. (C) Surprisingly, the view from KAUST was slightly different. PAS Jeddah attempted to program the same US-Embassy sponsored musical duo to perform on campus during a school day. The university's events manager -- an AMCIT -- welcomed the idea and suggested the student library as a venue since the university theater was still under construction. During the approval process however, the program was thwarted by Dr. Najah Ashry, the Assistant Provost for Student Affairs. The events manager explained that KAUST's administration was particularly nervous about any event that could potentially promote dancing, in light of a recent YouTube video that purportedly showed a male Saudi student dancing at the university's cafeteria.

15. (C/NF) In conversations with post contacts by Emboffs and PAS staff, a different perspective from that of Dr. al-Bazei's has emerged. During a meeting last Wednesday, for example, foreign news agency personnel in Riyadh told Emboffs that they were tracking the possibility that conservatives are steadily regaining influence in Saudi society at the expense of King Abdullah's vision. Citing off-the-record conversations with unnamed SAG officials and others, the Reuters bureau chief (protect) said he had heard that Sheikh Sa'ad Nasser Al-Shithri, the 42-year old Saudi cleric who was relieved of his duties on the Council of Senior Scholars on October 4 after criticizing KAUST, has become something of a hero to less affluent Saudi youth, who resent the fact that foreign students are studying at KAUST while their own educational opportunities and career prospects are limited. The bureau chief also said these contacts assert that Sheikh al-Shithri knew well that he would be fired for criticizing KAUST, and had planned his challenge to the King with other religious conservatives who feel emboldened by an alleged alliance between the religious establishment and Minister of Interior Naif bin Abdulaziz, who is widely assumed by most Saudis to be the likely successor to King Abdullah and the ailing Crown Prince.

16. (S/NF) Another bureau chief told us that a contact in the Ministry of Interior (MOI) told her that religious conservatives have regrouped and are pushing back against the progressive agenda of King Abdullah. She said in this context that a "well-placed" MOI official told her that the World Association of Muslim Youth (WAMY) is again fostering an ultra-conservative agenda for young Saudis as a deliberate counter-point to the King's emphasis on tolerance and interfaith dialogue, and that the organization has recently opened

RIYADH 00001532 002 OF 002

two chapters in Saudi cities without an official license while the MOI turns a blind eye. (Note: This contact, an expatriate Arab, told us that she takes everything she hears from Saudis with a grain of salt, as officials often try to use her and other foreign journalists to settle internecine rivalries. We concur with her caution. End note.)

17. (C/NF) PAS staff have also commented to us on conversations they have had with Saudis who are opposed to the King's reformist vision as embodied by KAUST. One of our secretaries reported that a moderately-minded Saudi science lecturer at King Saud University told her last week that increasing numbers of ordinary Saudis (including himself) believe that KAUST is simply an effort by the King to import western values and social morays into the country, and that he and others he knows are not happy about it. One of our senior cultural specialists shared an email chain from a Saudi women's group she works with on our programs that featured photographs of young Arab co/eds at KAUST clad in western dress dancing with foreign men, and posing in wet tops with their arms over Arab and western male students as they all sat in a fountain. Others show young Arab female students laughing and socializing with male colleagues over dinner.

18. (C) While this email--which our staffer said is being passed to an ever-widening circle of recipients--had no accompanying commentary criticizing KAUST, the photos alone are enough, she said, to scandalize most average Saudis, who assume that the young women in these photos are Saudi. Other FSN staff strongly concurred with this, and said they are hearing similar anecdotes about KAUST being more of a plot to impose western values in violation of Islam than an effort to improve scientific study and research in the Kingdom.

19. (C) Comment: Like two continents, the SAG and the religious establishment grind against each other in their respective efforts to control the country's zeitgeist and institutions of power, and it would be a mistake to interpret the latest rift or rattle as evidence of a prolonged trend favoring one or the other. That said, the King's reforms continue to engender heated subterranean discussion in Saudi Arabia, and it could be that average Saudis, fearful of profound changes in their cultural and social milieu, are becoming increasingly concerned with the direction of reform overall, and are tending to back the religious establishment on KAUST and the broader

questions it raises. Saudi media, of course, report virtually nothing that would intimate any of this debate, and our contacts generally hew carefully to the party line on anything relating to the King's initiatives. We will, however, continue to listen where we can and report as appropriate. End Comment.